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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000161

SIPDIS

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EUR FOR DAS BRYZA AND CARC  
NSC FOR MARIA GERMANO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/25/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: ARMENIAN RECOUNT CONFIRMS SARGSIAN VICTORY, BUT IS  
MARRED BY CONTROVERSY, INTIMIDATION

Classified By: CDA JOSEPH PENNINGTON REASONS 1.5(b,d)

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) Recounts of ballots cast in last week's presidential election in most disputed precincts concluded on the afternoon of February 24. The recounts did not produce significant changes to the preliminary results announced by the Central Election Commission on February 20. But the process, which was marred by controversy and intimidation, will do little to reassure skeptical Armenians that their votes were counted fairly or to boost the legitimacy of PM Sargsian's first-round victory. Because of a tight time limit stipulated by Armenia's election law, votes in some hotly disputed precincts were not recounted. CDA observed recounts in four separate districts (TECs) over the weekend. Three of those recounts proceeded transparently and revealed only minor discrepancies in the vote. In the fourth TEC, CDA witnessed a three-hour standoff between election commission members from the opposition attempting to follow procedures by conducting a recount of a precinct disputed by second-place finisher Levon Ter-Petrossian and other commission members who successfully blocked the recount. In the end, a group of 20-30 thugs appeared on the scene and (after CDA had left at the suggestion of RSO) physically threw the opposition members out of the room and seized the ballots in question. Votes in that precinct remained uncounted as the deadline passed. End Summary.

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RE-COUNTS FAIL TO ALTER PRELIMINARY RESULTS  
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¶2. (U) Four days of recounting ballots from disputed precincts in Armenia's February 19 presidential election ended Sunday afternoon, and produced virtually no change to the preliminary results announced by the CEC last Wednesday. The CEC Chairman announced the final results immediately, declaring Prime Minister Serzh Sargsian the winner with 52.8 percent of the vote. Former President Levon Ter-Petrossian, who continues to lead thousands of supporters in a round-the-clock opposition rally in central Yerevan, came in second with 21.5 percent. Former Parliament Speaker Artur Baghdassarian finished in third place, with 16.7 percent. All other candidates remained in single digits.

¶3. (U) According to information provided by the CEC, recounts of ballots in 135 precincts were completed in response to a total of 159 complaints filed by 8 different candidates. The

Territorial Election Commissions (TECs), which were charged with implementing the recount process, were unable to complete recounts in the remaining 24 precincts. According to published results of the completed recounts, PM Sargsian lost 743 votes, Ter-Petrosian lost 186 votes, and other candidates experienced no change or a small increase in their vote totals. The most significant discrepancies were found in two precincts, where the PM's vote total had been inflated by nearly 500 votes. LTP supporters have rejected the results of the recounts, and have vowed to take their case to the Constitutional Court.

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TEC 5: THUGS, COPS, AND NO COUNTING...  
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¶4. (C) CDA personally attended four recounts over the weekend as an accredited observer. Three of the recounts proceeded smoothly, with a transparent process that found only minor discrepancies from the election night result. But in a precinct recount requested by the LTP campaign in the Yerevan district of Davitashen (TEC 5), a chaotic afternoon of arguing among commission members culminated with thuggish supporters of the Prime Minister illegally entering the counting room, physically ejecting commission members, and seizing the contested ballots.

¶5. (C) It was clear from the beginning that the majority of TEC members -- all except the representative of the opposition Orinats Yerkir and Heritage parties -- were reluctant to recount votes from the disputed precinct. Following a series of delaying tactics, a heated argument developed between the two members who wanted to proceed with the count, and the others who resisted. The Commission

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Chairman had disappeared earlier in the afternoon, claiming to be sick, and the Deputy Chairman refused to open the ballots. After the standoff had persisted for two hours, polchief text messaged MFA Americas Director and a key PM adviser, Levon Martirosyan, to advise of the ongoing problem, remind them of the tight deadlines for recounts, and suggest quick intervention. Martirosyan texted back with thanks and a promise to break the logjam.

¶6. (C) At a certain point, a member of the CEC (also from Heritage) who was watching the proceedings pulled out the envelope containing the PM's votes, ripped it open, and displayed the ballot on top of the pile -- a vote for LTP. (Note: The CEC member later phoned to tell us she was being charged by a prosecutor for her action. End note.) Other members of the commission grabbed the envelope and stuffed the ballots back inside. Following another hour of deadlock, several black SUVs rolled up outside the building. More than 20 burly young men in leather jackets jumped out, entered the building, and began to infiltrate their way into the counting room. A number of armed, plainclothes policemen were standing nearby but made no effort to intervene. Several opposition parliamentarians and PM adviser Martirosyan also appeared on the scene. Ignoring the bigger picture that the required recount was not taking place, Martirosyan focused entirely on the alleged criminality of the Heritage CEC member who had opened the ballots to try to get the count started. As the atmosphere turned increasingly nasty, CDA left at the advice of the RSO -- police on the scene by this point had announced that they would not allow any more recounting that day. We learned by phone about 20 minutes later that the thugs had physically thrown the opposition commission members out of the room, seized control of the ballots, and provoked a scuffle with the MPs. The votes were never properly re-counted, though final CEC figures claim that a recount was done.

¶7. (U) Within minutes, word of the incident had reached LTP supporters demonstrating in Yerevan's Freedom Square. An LTP supporter mounted the stage to denounce the "outrageous

fraud" in the recount process that was committed "in full view of OSCE observers and a representative from the American embassy."

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ODIHR INTERIM REPORT EXPECTED SOON  
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¶18. (C) The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission (EOM) sent accredited observers to as many of the recounts as they could, but we have so far been unable to get a readout on what the EOM's more systematic observation may have uncovered. We presume, however, that these findings will be reflected in the next OSCE/ODIHR interim report, which we are told to expect in the first week of March. EOM staff foreshadowed last week that the interim report is likely to be somewhat tougher on Armenia than the February 20 preliminary report.

¶19. (C) The LTP camp did not help itself during the recount process. All of the campaign's energy and attention has been focused on the ongoing protest demonstrations in Freedom Square. The campaign was not effective in following the recounts closely through its proxies or compiling data about any alleged infractions.

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COMMENT  
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¶10. (C) Given that most of the recounting essentially confirmed the preliminary results, the authorities could have made a persuasive case that the process had enhanced the legitimacy of the PM's victory. The outrageous interference with the recount effort in TEC-5, however, was probably enough to ensure that the recount will do little to convince Armenians who do not support PM Sargsian that their votes have been counted fairly. It is unclear whether the kind of thuggery we witnessed was directed by the campaign or -- more likely -- undertaken by local Sargsian supporters who had falsified the count and were determined not to be caught out (and face possible jail time). In any case, it is clear that, as on election day, the PM's campaign did not do enough to deter its supporters from bullying, intimidating, and occasionally using physical force against representatives of

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the opposition to ensure a first-round victory.

¶11. (C) The thuggish behavior is all the more puzzling, given that the numbers coming in from most recounts confirmed the initial results and worked against LTP's argument that the election was stolen. In the end, we will never know what a true count would have shown. Even if the 24 remaining disputed precincts had been counted, however, even drastic changes to the initial results in favor of the opposition would not have been enough to push the PM's vote total under 50 percent. The problem for the authorities -- and the reason for the continued strength behind the LTP rallies -- is that the counting problems only reinforced the impression of many voters during the course of the campaign and on election day that the authorities used every weapon at their disposal to ensure the PM was elected and to avoid a second round. It is the fundamental lack of trust in a process that appeared unfair from the start that is keeping people in the street at the growing risk of confrontation.

PENNINGTON